

Christmas Music Sunday

Pastor's Reflections

From the Pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

December 11th, 2022

Matt Matthews

Over the course of his life, Andrew Carnegie endowed 2,811 libraries and many charitable foundations as well as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. You probably knew these things. You may not know he also bought 7,689 organs for churches. The purpose of this gift was, in Carnegie's words, "To lessen the pain of the sermons."

To lessen the pain of this day's sermon, we marshal the gifts of musician, poet, and song to tell the story of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ.

A reading from Luke's gospel, chapter two:

English: 8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

French: 8 Il y avait dans la même région des bergers qui passaient la nuit dans les champs pour y garder leur troupeau.

9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

French: 9 Un ange du Seigneur leur apparut et la gloire du Seigneur resplendit autour d'eux. Ils furent saisis d'une grande frayeur.

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

French: 10 Mais l'ange leur dit: «N'ayez pas peur, car je vous annonce une bonne nouvelle qui sera une source de grande joie pour tout le peuple: 11 aujourd'hui, dans la ville de David, il vous est né un Sauveur qui est le Messie, le Seigneur.

12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

French: 12 Voici à quel signe vous le reconnaîtrez: vous trouverez un nouveau-né enveloppé de langes et couché dans une mangeoire.»

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

French: 13 Et tout à coup une foule d'anges de l'armée céleste se joignit à l'ange. Ils adressaient des louanges à Dieu et disaient: 14 «Gloire à Dieu dans les lieux très hauts, paix sur la terre et bienveillance parmi les hommes!

* * *

For the shepherds, it all began in the sky.

The shepherds were minding their own business on the ground, placidly (we imagine) placidly watching over their flocks, when the angel fills that night sky with glittery wings and a sonorous voice announcing Good News about the birth of God’s Messiah. The shepherds were amazed. A host of other angels joined in.

They went to Bethlehem. They found Jesus and Mary and Joseph, just as the angels said they would, and they—these befuddled shepherds—were amazed again by what they saw. Mary was amazed, also, pondering this holy scene in her heart.

Everyone was amazed—the shepherds, Mary, and everybody the shepherds told. All of them were amazed, amazed.

And we are, too.

We are amazed by what God has done and by what God is doing in Jesus Christ.

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*Creator of the stars of night, your people’s everlasting light,
Jesus, Redeemer, save us all, and hear your servants when they call.*

* * *

Creator of the Stars of Night

Text: Latin, 9th C.; arr. Richard Rossi

Creator of the stars of night, your people’s everlasting light,
Jesus, Redeemer, save us all, and hear your servants when they call.

Now grieving that the ancient curse should doom to death a universe,

You heal all those who need your grace and come to save our fallen race.

You came when old world drew towards night, appearing not in princely might,
But born of Mary mother mild, became the victim undefiled.

At your great name majestic now, all knees must bend, all hearts must bow;
All things in heaven and earth adore, and own you, King for evermore.

Great judge of all in that last day, be present then with us we pray;
Your scattered people Lord, unite, in victory over Satan's might!

To God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, Three in One,
Praise, honor, might and glory be from age to age eternally. Amen!

Sing We Now of Christmas (Noel Nouvelet) **Text: trad. French; arr. Richard Zgodava**

Sing we now of Christmas, sing we here Noel!
Of our Lord and Savior, we the tidings tell.
Sing we Noel! For Christ the King is born, Noel!
Sing we now of Christmas, sing we here, Noel!

Angels did say, O shepherds come and see,
Born in Bethlehem, a blessed Lamb for thee.
Sing we Noel! For Christ is born, Noel!
Sing we now of Christmas, sing we here, Noel!

In the manger bed, the shepherds found the Child.
Joseph was there, and Mother, Mary mild.
Sing we Noel! For Christ the King is born, Noel!
Sing we now of Christmas, sing we here, Noel!

Magi oriental journeyed from afar.
They did come to greet him 'neath the shining star.
Sing we Noel! For Christ the King is born, Noel!
Sing we now of Christmas, sing we here, Noel!

Now together sing, Let our voices ring,
Thanks to God on high. Sing we here, Noel!

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming **#129 Hymnal**

(Congregational hymn)

1 Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.

2 Isaiah 'twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright
She bore to men a Savior
When half-gone was the night.

3 This Flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God,
From sin and death He saves us
And lightens every load

The danger of the lullabies we are about to hear and sing is twofold. The first danger is that we pause too long at the manger, so long as to believe baby Jesus never grows up. The second danger is that we don't pause long enough, thereby overlooking God's profound gift to the world.

*Infant holy, infant lowly,
for his bed a cattle stall;
oxen lowing, little knowing
Christ the babe is Lord of all.
Swiftly winging angels singing,
bells are ringing, tidings bringing:
Christ the child is Lord of all!
Christ the child is Lord of all!*

Here, Mid the Ass and Oxen Mild
Trad. French text and tune; arr. Alice Parker

Here, mid the ass and oxen mild,

sleep, sleep, sleep, my little child.
Thousand seraphim, thousand cherubim,
come from heav'n above to guard the Lord of Love.

Here, where sweet flowers their fragrance bring,
sleep, sleep, sleep, my little King.
Thousand seraphim, thousand cherubim,
Come from heav'n above to guard the Lord of Love.

Here, where the shepherds' search is done,
sleep, sleep, sleep my little son.
Thousand seraphim, thousand cherubim,
Come from heav'n above to guard the Lord of Love.
King of angels, sleep.

Angels, From the Realms of Glory **text J. Montgomery; music-Malcolm Archer**

Angels, from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story now proclaim Messiah's birth:
Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn King.

Shepherds, in the field abiding, watching o'er your flocks by night,
God and man is now residing; yonder shines the Infant Light.
Refrain.

Sages, leave your contemplations; brighter visions beam afar;
See the great Desire of nations; ye have seen his natal star:
Refrain.

Saints before the altar bending, watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending, in his temple shall appear:
Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn King.

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly **#128 hymnal** Congregational hymn

1 Infant holy, infant lowly,
for his bed a cattle stall;
oxen lowing, little knowing
Christ the babe is Lord of all.
Swiftly winging angels singing,

bells are ringing, tidings bringing:
Christ the child is Lord of all!
Christ the child is Lord of all!

2 Flocks were sleeping, shepherds keeping
vigil till the morning new
saw the glory, heard the story,
tidings of a gospel true.
Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow,
praises voicing, greet the morrow:
Christ the child was born for you!
Christ the child was born for you!

* * *

Rachel McCormick is a high school teacher in the Bronx. She fell in love with and married a man from Oaxaca, Mexico, who, years before, walked across the Sonoran Desert for a better life in the United States.

After their marriage, Rachel wanted to know what his passage across the desert might have been like. She wanted to walk in his footsteps.

She volunteered for two weeks with a group called “No More Deaths,” an advocacy group founded by religious leaders including John Fife, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church, that seeks to bring water, food, and medical attention to migrants in the desert. No More Deaths operate a Migrant Center in Agua Prieta, just across the border at Douglas, Arizona.

Our mission Co-worker Mark Adams knows this ministry well.

South of Tucson, Rachel McCormick was impressed by the bright maroon soil, the prickly green plants, and animals that howled and rattled. It was a dangerous, stark, beautiful place, she thought. The armed border agents prowled there, also, in howling helicopters and at roadblocks. As a white woman, Rachel McCormick felt safe from the border agents. But no one is safe from the heat, especially in summer. And no one survives without water.

“At least 853 migrants died trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border unlawfully in the past 12 months, making fiscal year 2022 the deadliest year for migrants recorded by the U.S. government, according to internal Border Patrol data obtained by CBS News.”^[1]

During her two-week stay in the desert, Rachel McCormick and other volunteers left hundreds of gallons of water in plastic jugs in hopes that thirsty migrants would be sustained for their journey. She thought of her beloved husband. She is grateful he

survived, grateful they found each other, grateful they are making their life in the Bronx with their two daughters, grateful that journey across the Sonoran Desert is a long-ago memory for her husband. She is grateful her husband never again has to step foot in that desert.

But she and we lament others still wander those desert trails.

We know our immigration policies in our country need reform. People like Mark Adams are working on it, and so are many of our elected officials in Washington. By God's grace we'll get there, and we'll better live into our creed to welcome the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

In the meantime, as we work for justice for all, as we strive to welcome all people around the table, we need the cradle. We need to experience *first-hand* God's welcome there, God's gift, and God's calling to share that holy welcome with all others.

* * *

*Come to the cradle where darkness is light.
Worship the babe, who in weakness is might.
The Christ Child has come to a world cloaked in night.
Follow the star and bow down in his sight.*

How Unto Bethlehem **Text-trad. Italian; arr. Alice Parker**

"How unto Bethlehem this pilgrimage of Kings?
What wonder your arrival brings,
How strange the royal diadem in Bethlehem."

"Seek we a King, and honor bear him from afar,
His birth proclaimed by a star. 'Tis surely near,
Oh tell us, pray, is this the way?"

"Ah, but the child ye seek so richly to adorn
Of lowly maid is lowly born,
His palace but a stable bare, no crown lies there."

"Seek we the stable, then, for though in manger laid
And lowly born of lowly maid,
This day a kingdom is begun and His the one."

Then hail Him, King of Wisdom, King of Love and Bliss,
For King in truth this baby is.

The Savior of mankind is He eternally.

Come to the Cradle-

**text, Cathy Conger; music, Cathy/Laura Conger;
arr. R. Scholz**

Come to the cradle where darkness is light.
Worship the babe, who in weakness is might.
The Christ Child has come to a world cloaked in night.
Follow the star and bow down in his sight.

Is this Messiah, so helpless, so small;
Greater than David, yet born in a stall.
How could this baby, cause kingdoms to fall?
Sweet, tiny Child, are you Savior of us all?

Be not afraid, here is peace in this place.
Bring him your heart and be healed by his grace.
There is joy in his smile, there is love in his face.
With shepherds and angels, rejoice, sing his praise.

Sing hallelujah, the joyous bells ring.
The eve of this Christmas let all peoples sing.
Follow the wise men, your gifts to him bring:
Jesus, Immanuel, Savior and King.

Come to the cradle where darkness is light.
Peace in this place. Healed by his grace.
Love in his face. Come, come.

Christmas Day: Choral Fantasy on Old Carols arr. Gustav Holst

Good Christian friends rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
Give ye heed to what we say: News! News! Jesus Christ is born today;
Ox and ass before him bow, and he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today! Christ is born today!

God rest you merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,
For Jesus Christ our Savior was born upon this day,
To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray.
O tidings of comfort and Joy, comfort and Joy, O tidings of comfort and Joy!

In Bethlehem, in Jewry, this blessed babe was born,

And laid within a manger, upon this holy morn;
The blessed mother, Mary, did nothing take in scorn.
O tidings of comfort and Joy, comfort and Joy, O tidings of comfort and Joy!

Good Christian friends rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
Now ye hear of endless bliss: Joy! Joy! Jesus Christ was born for this!
He hath op'ed the heavenly door, and all are blessed for evermore.
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!

Come ye lofty, come ye lowly, let your songs of gladness ring:
In a stable lies the Holy, in a manger rests the King:
See, in Mary's arms reposing, Christ by highest heaven adored:

Come, your circle round him closing, pious hearts that love the Lord.
Come, ye poor, no pomp of station robes the child your hearts adore:
He, the Lord of all salvation, shares your want, is weak and poor:

Oxen, round about behold them; rafters naked, cold and bare,
See the shepherds, God has told them that the Prince of Life lies there.
Come, ye children blithe and merry, this one child your model make;

Christmas holly, leaf, and berry, all be prized for his dear sake;
Come, ye gentle hearts and tender, Come, ye spirits, keen and bold;
All in all your homage render, weak and mighty, young and old.

High above a star is shining, and the wisemen haste from far:
Come, with hearts and spirits pining: in the east has risen a star.
Let us bring our poor oblations, thanks and love and faith and praise;
Come, ye people, come, ye nations, all in all draw nigh to gaze.

Noel, Noel, born is the King of Israel!

Good Christian friends rejoice! With heart and soul and voice:
Now ye need not fear the grave: Peace! Peace! Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all to gain his everlasting hall:
Christ was born to save!

^[1] <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-2022-record-high/>